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BEFORE THE WAR—III

NOTES ON THE GENIUS OF PLACES

BY VERNON LEE

HAMPTON COURT

Yesterday afternoon, returning to stay here, and again this morning, I have experienced not merely the imaginative quality of this place, but, mingled and harmonized with it, the emotional flavor of the days spent here last year with their Autumn poignancy and the poignancy also, of the eve of revisiting Germany. For the special emotion of travel attaches sometimes less to places we go to, than to those whence we are about to start. Anyhow, I have had, since returning here, a curious pervading feeling of farewell. And this fits in with the weather: one of those white misty mornings which, in the North, bring Autumn into midsummer, seeming to muffle sounds, the birds' chirp becomes suddenly dominant; and bringing out, with autumnal poignancy, the color of flowers and old brick-work.

Yesterday morning, in Bushey Park, I walked on the grass embedded with dry linden-flowers, walked down the vista of huge black trunks fringed even to the ground with green twigs. I wonder by what submerged association such limes, sprouting in their gnarledness, possess an absurd pathos for me, cause a little squeeze in the throat, mean age, the remote, and romance.

Round the big pond anglers were lazily intent strewing its bank with the bread of their bait. And on one side of the park spread a school-treat's merry-go-rounds and tents, little knots of blue and pink girls scattering across the bracken, whence rose flights of roe-deer, and the funny coughing bleat of the dams to their fawns leading them through the water.

Democracy grown up in the shelter of feudalism, this England, grown in a manner so orderly it might have been

directed, like London street traffic, by the paternal policeman! That is one of the charms of Hampton Court: that these wonderful flowerbeds are virtually for the people stacked in the electric cars and charabancs, and who spend hours examining varieties and taking down names from labels; their hungry imagination filled, no doubt, with that scent of exotic lilies which has got to express, for me, the elaborate exquisiteness of certain old fashioned English drawing rooms, where those tall white flowers stand stacked against the black and gold lacquer and carved oak.

Hampton Court, July 22.

AUGUST HARVEST-FIELDS

Among the South Downs, sitting at noon on a freshly reaped field, my back against a corn-stook; boisterous wind driving cloud shadows across my paper. I have just walked along a still unharvested field of wheat, extending to where the Downs descend with their chalk-scars and bushes. Under the wind, not tragic here in the valley, but merely playful, each separate ear rocks in its heavy ripeness, the whole swaying mass only the more unbroken. And the thought rushes up: how do these millions of serried undulating stalks compare, in number, to the armies now arraying against one another? If every man were changed into an ear of corn (and every man is indeed a despised corn-ear of the bodily and spiritual food of the world, a corn-ear about to be burnt down or trampled), would that give some picture of all those youths, ready for War's reaping-machine to whirl its Cultur through them rank by rank? Would the human crowd of those gone forth to kill and be killed, be less or more than these innumerable blades and ears? I have no notion. But perhaps a larger field even than this would be required to count, to symbolise, the human beings whom war is going to plunge into death and starvation and mourning.

August 6, 1914.

ON THE NORMAN MOORS

These last weeks on the Scottish Border have been haunted by a certain thought, perpetually intermeshing with the real scenery before my eyes; and no less with the after-

image thereof, in which, as may happen to all of us, I went on living a little while after leaving that country.

The thoughts in question came upon me suddenly one of those bitter mornings of premature winter, as the car swished down and up again through a little place called Green Haig: a half dozen black houses in a shallow trough between the endless empty moors of sere grass and rusty heather, where storms descend from moment to moment out of clear skies and sweep across these uplands, a hamlet whose bleak remoteness is brought home all the more for the few yellow birches in the burn and the steep roads crossing through it, as one feels, from nowhere to nowhere.

Well! The thought which struck me passing through Green Haig was that no remoteness, not even this, has been of avail against the war-tentacles. These half dozen black cottages have given their tribute of young men to the labyrinthine monster; and wheresoever in this England two or three lonely houses huddled together there you may see in the windows that colored card which at a distance has a queer look of representing a crimson chalice, a grail-cup full of consecrated blood.

Neither does the thought stop there, but goes on to whatsoever tiniest and remotest places I could remember seeing in other countries: huts on the pasture-tops of the lava,—coulées of Auvergne; minute Gascon towns gathered into feudal defences round some square Angevin church; hamlets on Apennine crests where the mules unload their charcoal, or like that place, just a few Venetian farms in the reclaimed lagoon-land, where we once spent a night on the way to the forsaken site of Aguileia. And, no less! those German villages with their apple-trees and crucifix and onion-shaped belfry accentuating the solitude and mystery of the great Franconian-Rhône fir-forests.

The sense of such remoteness and seclusion, grim or tender as may be, from the world's beaten ways is one of the most delightful of the intuitions, or perhaps delusions, of travel. One never forgets the places which have given it to one. And now with the thought of them is coupled the knowledge that thence also the lads have been marched away, thither also the tidings of wounds or captivity or death have been, and are ever being, brought.

Chipchase Castle, Nov., 1916.

VERNON LEE.